

DOCUMENTARY NEWS LETTER

NO. 6, 1943

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SIXPENCE

TAKE HEED FOR TOMORROW

WE are at a stage in the war when it is opportune for documentary film-makers to take stock. Inevitably and rightly they are looking towards the final phase and assessing their rôle. It is clear that the documentary film can and indeed must in the future play a vital part.

Let us examine the achievements of the past. In almost every wartime field the film of fact has made its contribution. With the help of films the fighting services have turned civilians into soldiers with a speed and efficiency surpassing anything previously known. The civilian population has been helped by the film to weld itself into a war-winning force no less essential than the uniformed men in the front line. The Civil Defence services have relied on films to increase the efficiency of firemen, fireguards, rescue workers, first-aid workers. The Ministry of Agriculture has used film to achieve a phenomenal increase in the productivity of our farmlands and our allotments. The health and morale of factory workers have been ministered to by the film; and the meal-break film show has come to be recognised as a permanently desirable adjunct of factory life.

We cannot pretend that the film has everywhere been used with maximum vision or efficiency. In many fields the achievements have been potential rather than real. Let us not pretend either that the tiny British documentary film movement of the pre-war years can claim credit for everything that has grown from its early and often unhonoured efforts. Yet it would be dangerous from motives of modesty or of any other kind to close our eyes to the when and the where and the why of the sowing of the original seed of this wartime achievement. For if we neglect origins we may overlook the persistent neglect of certain original documentary purposes, purposes which have always been in the forefront of documentary policy but have not always been reflected on the screen to a comparable extent with the instructional and expository types of films listed above.

The source of anxiety is that few of the above films look forward with hope to the future. This is not to say that Britain at war has made no good propaganda films. When it was a question of demonstrating to the world the courage and determination of the British people such films as *Target for Tonight* and *Desert Victory* could scarcely have been bettered. Yet the limitations of this field of propaganda are now clear. Defensive courage in the bombed streets of London and offensive courage on the field of battle are now accepted all over the world as British characteristics and the continued promotion of such themes has therefore ceased to be of primary importance. Nor should we any longer concern ourselves with the production of films extolling the past achievements of democracy and seeking thereby to justify its survival. Democracy has already been adequately justified and will survive. But it will survive only so long as it indicates a path forward. Democracy therefore needs, not

films which show the solution of past problems, but films which postulate new ones. The world is now anxious to know what are the ultimate and civilising aims of the British people.

Let us not exaggerate the change required in documentary emphases. The production of instructional films calculated to increase civil and service efficiency must go on. It is necessary also that we achieve the formulation and co-ordination of plans for the production of post-war educational films on an enormously broad scale. We must bring pressure in every way possible upon all appropriate bodies, both official and unofficial, to see that the instructional use of film—so clearly demonstrated in war—is fully utilised in peace. Nevertheless the fact remains that this great purpose cannot by itself give full scope to the potentialities of the documentary medium.

The main objective of documentary film policy has always been the production of films which would reveal the need for and the means towards progress in the social organisation of the community. If ever there was a case in the past for the relegation of such subjects to a second place of importance, that time has clearly passed. The issue of the fighting war (and indeed its continuance to final victory) may well depend on the clear perception of social goals by the peoples of the United Nations. Documentary must again become militant in the social field, returning to its most clearly creative function. For social criticism is amongst the most creative of all activities.

We need again in our films the crusading spirit of *Workers and Jobs*, *Housing Problems*, *Enough to Eat*, *Children at School*, *Face of Britain* and *The Londoners*. During the war there have, it is true, been a few attempts in the same kind. *The Harvest Shall Come* and *World of Plenty* represent new milestones along the old road. Techniques will change. New audiences will be won by new and more popular documentary styles. There is work to be done in the blending of documentary and traditional feature film techniques towards social ends. *Millions Like Us*, though its message may be obscure, is an example of a production technique with vast potentialities. The need is pressing, the field is vast, the techniques are available. The British democratic choice is between nationalism and internationalism, imperialism and emancipation, vested interest and public interest. It is a choice which the documentary film has been designed to articulate, objectively setting out the facts and leaving its audiences to draw their conclusions.

There has been much talk of the coming need for vocational training films: surely the first vocation for which we must train is active citizenship. Ahead of us lies the greatest opportunity which the documentary film movement has known. It is an opportunity which will not remain open indefinitely.

THE MONEY BEHIND THE FILMS

By Henry Fullerton

By courtesy of "Tribune"

Some of our readers will have read the following article when it appeared originally in "Tribune". We believe they will agree with us that it is of sufficient importance to warrant reprinting in a film journal. However, we do not necessarily associate ourselves with the conclusions advanced by the author. This version of the article is abridged.

IN a report issued in October, 1936, at the peak of the boom, the Film Council wrote:

"In the first ten months of 1936 loans of nearly £13,000,000 were poured into the three great spheres of production, renting and exhibition. Banks, insurance companies, legal investment trusts, even motor manufacturers, are falling over each other in their eagerness to stake a claim. Men and women who have scarcely given a thought to films all their lives are clamouring for posts in the studios, attracted by the rumours of high salaries and speedy promotion. . . . All across the country, queues of people wait outside the new super-cinema, while perhaps two streets away the steel girders of yet another half-finished 2,000-seater rise into the sky."

Let us now take a look at the structure of the British film industry before it emerged from what was certainly the most highly-speculative boom in the history of finance. Broadly speaking, the field was divided between three powerful groupings, each of which exerted varying degrees of influence over all three branches of the industry.

Occupying a key position through their powerful renting organisation were the big American companies—M.G.M., R.K.O., Radio, 20th Century-Fox, Warner and First National, Paramount, Columbia and Universal. Between them, these companies controlled various quota production units, but their exhibition interests were limited to a London pre-release hall, a dozen or so super-halls in key towns and an arrangement with the Union Circuit.

Next came the important Anglo-American alliance—United Artists—which had created a satellite swarm of "quality" production units and acquired a large interest in Oscar Deutsch's rapidly expanding Odeon circuit.

Against these two groups stood two major and independent British "Empires"—Associated British Pictures and Gaumont-British—whose main strength lay in their vertical organisation based on the control of nearly 600 cinemas. Apart from these two companies, the British industry was split into a number of small circuits and privately-owned halls; a variety of independent producers, and a number of minor British renters such as Associated British Film Distributors, Twickenham Film Distributors, British Lion, Equity British, Butcher's Film Service, etc.

This, then, was the position at the end of 1935; and it was a position ripe with possibilities for any man or group of men endowed with the necessary organisational ability, business acumen, and financial resources. As we have seen, lack of funds was the last thing from which the British industry suffered; but it must be realised that the greater part of the industry's financing in this period was of a planless and purely speculative nature. It holds true of any industry that loan-financing leads towards monopolisation only when practised by a restricted number of powerful financial groups acting on a predetermined, long-term plan. Operating quietly and unobtrusively beyond the limelight shared, at that time, by the "Napoleons" of the industry (Mr. John Maxwell of A.B.P., the Ostrer Brothers of Gaumont-British and Mr. Oscar Deutsch) was a Man with a Plan . . . and money . . . and influential "tie-ups."

The plan began to unfold when a certain Mr. C. M. Woolf resigned, in May, 1935, from the board of Gaumont-British. With

the aid of an English finance concern known as General Cinema Finance, Woolf founded General Film Distributors—an important new renting organisation which, within twelve months, was taken over by General Cinema Finance. Now, two of the finance company's directors were also on the board of the American company Universal. The result was a fusion of the renting interests of the American and British companies and the emergence of a new group which was shortly to make itself felt in all three branches of the industry.

In examining the directorate of General Cinema Finance, we find ourselves face to face with some of the most outstanding personalities in the world of English finance-capital.

Lord Portal of Laverstoke, chairman of the great Wiggins, Teape paper combine, and related to the famous Glyn banking family.

The late Lord Luke, chairman of Bovril, and with other interests ranging from gold mines and banks to publishing companies.

Paul Lindenburg, director of vast financial concerns in Britain, Canada, Austria, Rumania and the Netherlands.

Leslie William Farrow, holder of four chairmanships, three deputy-chairmanships, and 17 directorships in paper and other interests.

And . . . Mr. Joseph Arthur Rank.

Rank's Background

Rank inherited three things from his millionaire, mill-owner father: a fervent devotion to the Methodist cause, one of the largest fortunes in England, and a Machiavellian prowess in matters of modern financial practice. He inherited another thing—that peculiar quality of irrational austerity to which so many rich men attempt to "convert" a proletariat already forced to practise it by necessity. This trait was most strongly marked in his father who, on one occasion, after examining the plans for a new and handsome five-storey block of offices to be erected in Hull, dismissed a suggestion that lifts should be installed with the comment: "Workers can walk." Yet Joseph Rank is said to have given, in his lifetime, over a million pounds to the cause of Methodism.

Arthur Rank has himself given thousands of ciné projectors to Methodist churches and halls up and down the country, but does not permit himself the luxury of owning a machine for his own private use. This interesting contradiction in his character was very effectively displayed some time ago when a reporter, sent to interview him on the successful conclusion of a particularly smart financial deal, found him taking his usual Sunday school class at the Methodist Church, Reigate, where he lives.

Of his intentions towards the industry, over which he now wields such a large measure of control, it has been suggested (a) that he is primarily interested in the film's possibilities as a medium for the dissemination of religious doctrines; (b) that he is exclusively concerned with the personal power and material rewards derivable from a watertight monopoly over the industry.

As is so often true of such cases, the truth lies somewhere between these two propositions—though exactly where it would be difficult, if not impossible, to determine at this stage.

It is indicative, for example, that in his biggest business deals he has been content to play a waiting game, sometimes for years, moving his players here and there on the chessboard of high finance until he has created a situation where he can finally strike with a minimum of financial outlay to himself and a maximum of financial sacrifice to his competitors. A man of his enormous wealth, inspired—as has been suggested—by the impatient ardour of a religious crusader, would surely have been acting truer to type in going out for quick victories regardless of the immediate cost. On the other hand it can be pointed out that his very first activities in the industry, 15 years ago, were in connection with the production and distribution of a religious film; that his 61 chairmanships and directorships

encompass Methodist Newspapers Ltd., Methodist Publications Ltd., Methodist Times Co., and Religious Films Ltd., and that he has already stopped the production of a number of films which, in his opinion, lacked a sufficient moral basis.

As man, millionaire and Methodist, Rank has remained, and has the quality of continuing to remain, an enigma. As a potential monopolist he is at once an open book and a manual of instruction to anyone who cares to study his operations from 1935 to date. Considerations of space make it impossible for us to deal separately with the variety of small and relatively uninteresting acquisitions which followed the fusion between Universal and General Film Distributors early in 1936. Suffice it to say that as early as the autumn of that year the horizontal structure of the Rank interests loomed large out of the amorphous organism of the industry. The big story of those years lies in the circumstances attending Rank's greatest single triumph—the acquisition of the vast Gaumont-British "empire."

When Woolf resigned the deputy-chairmanship and managing-directorship of Gaumont-British in 1935 to join Rank he left a company which had experienced sufficiently good trading results to pay an average dividend on its £3,000,000 Ordinary capital of 13½ per cent for each of the past three years. He also, presumably, brought with him a complete dossier of all the facts and factors which contributed to that great combine's strength—and—more important—the nature of its weaknesses, actual and potential.

The Gaumont-British Deal

It began in the summer of 1936 when 20th Century-Fox, in alliance with Loew (the largest shareholder in Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer) made a spectacular bid for the control of Metropolitan and Bradford Trust, the holding company controlling Gaumont-British. Such a deal, had it gone through, would have produced the most formidable Anglo-American alliance in the industry; but, curiously enough in view of their bargaining power and prestige, the Fox-M.G.M. offer was not immediately accepted by the Ostrer Brothers (who held the key voting shares in Metropolitan and Bradford). The late John Maxwell, then chairman of Associated British Picture and Rank's greatest British rival, swallowed the bait, hook, line and sinker. Alarmed on the one hand by the apparent prospect of a new and all-powerful competitor, and captivated on the other by the vision of creating a solid phalanx of 780 theatres (A.B.P. owned 295; Union Cinemas, acquired later by Maxwell, owned 136, and Gaumont-British owned 345) Maxwell made a lightning bid for the Ostrers' interests.

The Ostrers were most obliging. They sold him 250,000 non-voting shares in Metropolitan & Bradford for £618,125 (the market value of the shares at that time was £209,375) and gave him an option to purchase their 5,100 "A" voting shares—in which reposed the control of Gaumont-British—for £800,000. As soon as the non-voting shares were transferred, 20th Century-Fox, who held the balance of 4,900 Metropolitan & Bradford "A" shares, announced that they would exercise their right to veto the transfer of the Ostrers' "A" shares to Maxwell. As a result, the Ostrer Brothers made a profit of £408,750 and incurred a debt of gratitude to the master-mind behind the plan, while Maxwell paid heavily for a block of strategically valueless shares and saw his hopes of an A.B.P.-Gaumont "empire" fade and then vanish completely.

Meanwhile, the new policy of producing "quality" British films for the world market—initiated by United Artists and taken up in a big way by the Rank combine—had had most unfortunate repercussions inside the hitherto prosperous Gaumont-British "empire". In November, 1936, Mark Ostrer had to inform his shareholders that the company's overdraft with the National Provincial Bank had risen by £482,000 over the previous year—of which amount approximately £247,904 represented indebtedness incurred in the company's efforts to produce and distribute for a world market. The only hope, he declared, of restoring the company's profitability on the production side lay in the abandonment of this policy and the production of cheap films for the home market.

But the company's profitability was not restored. Net earnings in the following year fell from £375,506 to £195,213, and shareholders went without a dividend for the second year in succession. Nor did they receive anything until 1942, when control of the company finally passed to Joseph Arthur Rank. Throughout this period, Mark Ostrer persistently refused his shareholders' demands for the publication of a consolidated balance-sheet which alone would show the company's real financial position.

Now for the dénouement.

Four-Power Alliance

In October, 1941, Rank bid for, and acquired, the Ostrer Brothers' 5,100 "A" shares in Metropolitan & Bradford. The price paid for the shares was £700,000—or £100,000 less than that offered by John Maxwell. Moreover, 20th Century-Fox made no attempt, this time, to frustrate the deal. Earlier, in January, 1939, Rank had joined the board of another "empire," Odeon Theatres, in which he held a large block of shares. Three years later, almost to the day, Oscar Deutsch died, and Rank became the new Odeon chairman. Against Associated British Pictures was now rallied the might of a mammoth, four-power alliance: Gaumont-British, Odeon Theatres, General Film Distributors and Universal. John Maxwell, who had come so near to the Promised Land, was spared the humiliation of seeing it lorded over by his powerful rival. He died in the summer of 1941. Had he lived, his cup of bitterness must certainly have overflowed on October 13th, 1942, for on that date it was announced that the 250,000 non-voting shares in Metropolitan & Bradford Trust which he had bought, on behalf of his company, for £618,125, had been sold to Rank for £450,000.

It remains now to examine the structure of the British film industry as it exists to-day; to determine to what extent the industry is endangered by Rank's monopolistic activities, and to propound what we believe to be certain fundamental pre-requisites to the healthy development of what, rightly directed, can become one of the nation's most valuable cultural, educational and economic assets.

On the production side, Rank now controls approximately three-quarters of the studio space not taken over by the Government. Indeed, with the exception of the Ealing studios (largely owned by Stephen Courtauld of the rayon family), Lady Yule's National Studios at Elstree, and Warner Brothers' studios at Teddington, we have been unable to trace a production unit of any importance over which Rank does not exercise either direct personal control through his English companies or indirect influence through his American associates.

American Renters Dominate

On the renting side, the American companies still dominate the field—handling, between them, 70 to 75 per cent of all films shown in this country. It should be noted, however, that Rank distributes the films of three of these companies—Universal, United Artists and 20th Century-Fox. (The managing director of United Artists joined the Odeon board in 1942 and Fox, as we have already seen, is a large shareholder in Metropolitan & Bradford Trust.)

On the exhibition side, Rank's only real competitor is Associated British Picture. Through Gaumont-British he controls approximately 350 cinemas; through Odeon approximately 300, and recent traceable acquisitions bring the grand total up to 700. The majority of these properties are of the "super cinema" type, and it is estimated that these, and the great number of independent cinemas with which Rank has renter-contracts, absorbs about 7,000,000 of the country's cinema-going population. Were Rank to gain control of the A.B.P.'s 500-odd halls, it is certain that he would become the supreme arbiter of the cinema-going public's entertainment and instruction. What are the possibilities of this happening?

Control of A.B.P. was originally vested in John Maxwell's holding of 4,050,000 of the company's 8,000,000 Ordinary shares. On his death the benefit of this holding passed to his widow. Subsequently some 2,000,000 shares were sold to Warner Brothers, but it was stated at the time that control remained in British hands. Now the A.B.P. Ordinary shares are in units of 5s., which means

The Money Behind Films (cont.)

that Rank, by open market, or covert transactions, has only to lay out, say, £625,000 to acquire control of this £4,000,000 combine over the heads of Mrs. Maxwell and her nominees on the A.B.P. board. It would be interesting to know—(a) what happened to the 300,000 A.B.P. Ordinary shares which were part of the purchase price in the deal between John Maxwell and the Ostrer Brothers (Mark Ostrer is now a joint managing-director of Gaumont-British), and (b) how many A.B.P. shares are at present held by Rank, his nominees and his associates? Perhaps Lord Winterton, of the Odeon board, can be prevailed upon to supply this information in the Commons, of which he is a member.

In view of the war-time shortage of studio space Rank can pick and choose the producers to whom he lets British "stages," and impose on these producers whatever conditions he pleases. He can then distribute the finished products through his own renting organisation and exhibit them in his own cinemas. He has thus already achieved a virtual monopoly over the production, distribution and exhibition of *British* films. But his stranglehold on the industry does not end there. Up to January, 1943, nearly 90 per cent of the cinemas in the country depended for equipment and servicing facilities on two companies—G.B. Equipments Ltd., and Kalee Ltd. These two concerns have now merged, under Rank's control, into a single organisation known as G.B.-Kalee. Rank also controls two newsreel companies, one of which (Gaumont-British) circulates extensively at home and abroad, and is being used as a mouthpiece for the expression of views and comment of a singularly narrow nationalistic nature.

Dalton Steps In

But with all this, Rank's greed for power remains unabated. Some months ago, Mr. F. Del Giudice, of Two City Films Ltd., put forward a proposal that his company and the other concerns controlled by Rank should come to an agreement with the major American renters to supply them with *all* their British quota requirements, and to form "Scenario Institute Ltd." to buy up film rights, screen plays and scenarios. This latest *ballon d'essai* brought matters to a head in the industry. The Association of Ciné-Technicians described the Del Giudice proposal as an attempt to monopolise film production on the one hand and creative talent on the other without offering any safeguards as regards trade union conditions and rights "and greatly reducing both the opportunities and remuneration of technicians". Mr. T. O'Brien, general secretary of the National Association of Theatrical and Kine Employees, made a public appeal to Parliament to give some attention to what was going on in the industry. "Trustification," he declared, "was expanding so rapidly that unless it was checked all the main control of the entertainment industry would be in the hands of a monopoly."

Under pressure of public opinion Mr. Dalton, President of the Board of Trade, was forced to intervene, and on July 14th it was announced that he had met Mr. Rank and had informed him that the Government could not acquiesce in the creation "of anything like a monopoly at any stage in the film industry". Mr. Dalton's strange conviction that the Rank "empire" is completely devoid of any monopolistic aspect is shown in a letter which he addressed to Rank at that time. In it he refers to Rank's undertaking not to acquire any additional film interests without the prior consent of the President of the Board of Trade, "*such consent not to be unreasonably withheld*." Now, the very least that can be said of Rank's organisation is that it bears more than a fleeting resemblance to a monopoly. How, then, can the President of the Board of Trade—if he is honestly opposed to "anything like a monopoly"—give his consent to any further absorption by Rank of the very limited number of independent producers? And in what circumstances can his consent ever be "unreasonably withheld?"

But Rank is not worrying unduly. Dalton left him with a loophole wide enough—to get a cinema through. "In cases in which bids

already made are accepted," he said in his letter, "I raise no objection." Since July, Rank has acquired four Paramount "super-halls" in London, Liverpool, Glasgow and Birmingham, three London halls from the Metropolitan Cinema Investment Corporation, and the six London and suburban halls owned by Joseph Mears Theatres. It remains to be seen how many more independent companies have been pondering, since July, over the highly attractive spot cash offers which Rank is in the habit of making.

What Can Government do?

So much for the rise and fulfilment of the Rank "empire". And now, what of the future? By what means can the Government, acting on behalf of the people, break the dangerous stranglehold which monopoly-capitalism exerts on the industry without damaging it in the process?

First and foremost, legislation must be enacted on the pattern of the U.S. anti-trust laws which forbid any ownership link between the three branches of production, distribution and exhibition. These three branches must be disintegrated financially and made completely independent.

To reduce production overheads and ensure an adequacy of funds for the employment of skilled technicians, actors and writers, and for other costs incurred in production, the Government must:

- (a) Requisition *all* studio space which would be rented on a non-profit basis to British production units.
- (b) Take the highly profitable business of distribution out of the hands of the quasi-parasitical "middleman" and put it in the care of a reconstructed Film Council. Divert all net profits therefrom to a central fund for the subsidising of "quality" production.

The country's 5,000 cinemas should come under the control of a public corporation responsible to Parliament through a Council representative of producer, distributor and trade union interests. Part of the profits from exhibition should be applied to a fund for the renewal, improvement and expansion of cinema properties and the balance to the reduction of entrance charges.

The quota of British films should be fixed, after the war, at a statutory minimum of, say, 30 per cent. This quota should be raised as and when the output and quality of the domestic product justifies such an increase and the present statutory "ceiling" should be abolished.

We do not claim that the implementation of these measures would, automatically and immediately, bring economic prosperity, functional virility and artistic efflorescence to the film industry. There remains a host of minor and incidental problems to be tackled before such a far-reaching step as the complete "de-trustification" of the industry can be taken. But we believe that there are few, if any, of these minor problems which do not admit of easy solution provided the essential measures listed above are fearlessly implemented by a Government drawn from the people rather than from the Directory of Directors.

One final point. Half-hearted measures aimed, for example, at restoring competitive independence in the sphere of production *will do more harm than good* if they are unaccompanied by legislation, on the lines mentioned above, in the other two spheres. The problem is too big and the industry too volatile to admit of niggling, unco-ordinated action on the model set by Dalton last July. The choice is no longer between private capitalist enterprise and monopoly-capitalist trustification: it is between monopoly ownership and public ownership.

Appendix!

All references in this article to persons living, dead or unconscious are made in a spirit of cold objectivity. Mr. Rank has a sufficiently good opinion of himself to accept ours with equanimity; Mr. John Maxwell is past caring; the President of the Board of Trade is past hope.

NOTES OF THE MONTH

Vocational Training Films

THE WAR OFFICE has announced its intention of sponsoring the production of vocational training films which will help to prepare soldiers for post-war employment. This is an admirable project but surely it should not be undertaken by one of the Services in isolation. If Army, Navy and Air Force each make independent plans for placing their personnel after the war, the only result will be hopeless confusion. Moreover, the nature of vocational training should so obviously be determined by probable post-war industrial demands that training film programmes should be drawn up only in association with the Board of Trade and the Ministry of Labour. The Board of Education, if it is in the future to take a wide and courageous view of its responsibilities, should also concern itself with this matter. The solution would appear to be the setting up of a joint committee on which would be represented, the Services, the Board of Trade, the Ministry of Labour and the Board of Education, the function of this committee being to deal with matters affecting the employment of demobilised servicemen including their vocational training by means of the film.

Aubrey Flanagan

OUTSIDE Trade circles, the day-to-day work of film trade journalists is little known. If you can stomach the gawdy adverts, you can often read some first-class criticism—hard-boiled but honest. A film trade critic not only reviews current production from an entertainment angle; his job can also mean keeping abreast of the political and commercial moves that stir the industry. He is, as it were, a reliable informer in this underworld of bluff, intrigue and jollity.

Aubrey Flanagan was a trade-paper film-man of high repute. His sudden death is a deep loss, not just to his many friends—and he had more than most men—but to the whole industry. For ten years he was assistant editor to *The Cinema*; from 1938 London Editor of the *American Motion Picture Herald*; from 1926 to 1930 film critic to the *Sunday Worker* under the name of Henry Dobb; and he contributed from time to time to *World Film News* and *Documentary News Letter*.

A sane, level-headed critic of films, sensitive to new ideas and developments yet never forgetting the entertainment objective of most feature product, Aubrey was a born news-getter. Alert to everything worthwhile that happened in the contemporary scene, he never wanted to do anything but write. Boxing was his first love, then variety, and then the movies. From his earliest days, he had an inexhaustible fund of anecdotes and a rich sense of humour. His flood of stories about film-trade personalities was unrivalled, always subtly revealing of character. At the same time, he was without dispute the most reliable mine of information about the industry in Wardour Street. Always a warm believer in documentary, he was quick to spot its weaknesses and never hesitated to state them. He hated the dilettante, the phoney, and the stooge. He could pick out the honest attempt from the tawdry imitation, and did not fail to expose the fake.

Earning his own keep since he left school when his father died, Aubrey never lost touch with the ordinary people. That was his great strength. In the London blitz he frequently went down to the East End and sang again those old Cockney songs which at one time he sang outside pubs to raise his fare home. No trade lunch at the Savoy, no cocktails in the vestibule could deceive his acute estimate of a film, and the people who produced, rented or showed it. Wardour Street knew him as a trade-paper writer; some of us shared his love for the English countryside—its churches and villages, its pubs

and its history. As his oldest friend says: "He was never bored and he was never boring." He was 46 when a heart attack killed him last month. We shall miss him greatly; the Trade has too few such people.

Harry Rignold

Too often producers and directors in documentary take for fact the part played by photography in their films. The group of cameramen which has grown up in our British documentary world has given much to the prestige with which our films as a whole have been credited. True some directors handle cameras themselves; many films have more than one cameraman; material from stock plays an increasing rôle in production; yet the hard fact sticks, it is the visuals in such films as *Nightmail*, *North Sea* and *Face of Britain* that hang in the mind. The documentary cameraman is often overshadowed by the director or the cutter. He's a technician around the place, turning from one picture to the next, from one director to another. He has not the satisfaction of seeing a film right through from script to married print. His reward is the quality of the rushes; after that, anything may happen to his work. He shoots in the craziest of conditions which any studio-trained cameraman would refuse. He seldom gets newspaper credit. George Noble, Jimmie Rogers, Stanley Rodwell, the late George Pocknall, Jeakins, Frank Goodliffe, Jack Parker, Frank Bundy, Bud Onions, Jonah Jones, Chick Fowle, Teddie Catford, Beadle and Jago—these are some of the patient workers to whom our films owe so much over the past thirteen years.

And going through almost all that decade was Harry Rignold, now killed in action in Italy: A Captain and a Military Cross.

Harry—no one really called him Rignold—was working as an assistant to Freddie Young when, after a bit of bad luck, the studios passed him up, in 1933, and he was taken on by Bruce Woolfe at Welwyn. In the next seven years he worked on many documentaries, at first as an assistant in turn to Jack Parker, George Pocknall and Jimmie Rogers. From Pocknall he learned his knowledge of exterior photography at which he became in the top class. In 1934-35 he went twice round the country with Paul Rotha shooting material for *The Face of Britain* and he was all through the twelve months location work on *Shipyards*. Attached to G.B.I. he also did much work for Mary Field. In 1936 he joined Strand, and shot for Hawes, Alexander, Shaw and Ruby Grierson. He joined Rotha again on *New Worlds for Old*, was right through the six months shooting on *The Times* film, in which his exteriors were brilliant. At the outbreak of war, he was with the G.P.O. Film Unit, worked on *The First Days*, and was the first cameraman to join the then miniature Army Film Unit. The stories of him in France and North Africa were all characteristic of his never-failing good humour, unlimited capacity for hard work and ease with which he got along with people. This latter quality made him a great asset on a unit. Not only did Harry maintain friendly relations within a unit, but he most often guaranteed smooth working in relations without. In the summer of 1941, the A.F.U. loaned him to Rotha Films to photograph Nieter's *Blood Transfusion* film and this probably represents his best lighting work... he was destined to be very good.

But what is the use of saying more? As the offensive sharpens, I suppose it is inevitable that documentary will lose some of its best workers and friends. One of those was Harry. He often thought we were crazy in what we asked him to shoot, but he always shot it well. He never refused to work, he never had an alibi, he was always enthusiastic and deeply camera-conscious. He was the smoothest operator I have ever known. We can ill do without him. He was the kind of person who made the struggle of production a great deal easier by his generous outlook.

NEW DOCUMENTARY FILMS

Words and Actions. Realist Film Unit. For the British Commercial Gas Assoc. *Director:* Max Anderson. *Camera:* A. E. Jeakins. *Commentator:* Colin Wills. *Script:* Frank Sainsbury and John Taylor. *Producer:* E. Anstey.

Subject: How democracy can be made to work. *Treatment:* The apparently rough and ready treatment given to film subjects by the Realist Unit has often the effect of unprovoked aggression. If a film can be said to have a chin, Realist films always have theirs stuck out. There is seldom any nonsense about trimmings in the way of smoothing opticals or soothing music, their characters are not chosen with a view to charming nor is their message wrapped up in pink cellophane. That this is by design and not accident would seem to be obvious to anybody who gives more than a moment's thought to their films, and the fact that one is seldom able to forget any of them is a tribute to the success of the method.

In a world where loose meanings are attached to words and slogans and headlines have replaced coherent thought, it is refreshing and stimulating to find a film which sets out to restate the essential meaning of one of the most prostituted words in our language. DEMOCRACY has become a word, for narks, a narcotic for frightened minds. "After all," they probably mutter, as they scan their prosperous activities, "Old So-and-So uses it and he was always on our side—it must be a good word to use." All the old nefarious, anti-social activities flourish and the more they flourish the louder they cry DEMOCRACY.

Words and Actions shows how democracy can be made to work, in fact, does work. Not on the hocus pocus level of Freedoms and Charters, but on the day-to-day and important level of rent and army pay and hire-purchase agreements and allotments. The film takes several instances—a woman with a husband in the forces who cannot pay her instalments on the furniture, another woman who is not getting an extra allowance from the army—and other problems which make up the texture of people's daily lives. It shows the individual confronted by these problems and putting up with them as part of life's general miseries.

Then he or she talks to other people about the problem, suggestions are made by friends, officials, welfare officers. Then comes the realisation that the individual can do something about it, can take action. This is the crucial point of the film, when the ordinary citizen wakes up and realises that he or she does not have to put up with things, but actually has power, even if it is a very small amount, to act and get things done. No less important is the preliminary lesson that co-operation between people—not vague People with a capital P—but the fellows one knows and meets as one moves about, one's own section of the world is the beginning of successful action.

The handling of the actors in the film is excellent—they look like real people and they behave like real people. The effect of reality is enhanced by the camera work which successfully avoids the Sunny Side Up technique, so popular with many lighting camera men, and yet does not find it necessary to follow the technique of the Hot Spot in the Black Pit or Art is All. It is a great pity that Max Anderson should now be training for a temporary career at sea instead of

following up this film with others and thus wrestling still further with the problem of reality on the screen.

Propaganda Value: *Words and Actions* was not made by the M.O.I. but we hear they are giving it their maximum non-theatrical distribution. The only drawback to the film is that some of the incidents which serve as illustration to the main theme are a little dated, not so much because they are not current events, as because they were matters of great importance a year or so ago. However they do not in any way interfere with the job of putting across once more the important message that the world is run by people and that we, the audience, are the people and that what sort of a world we get depends on us.

Silage. Realist Film Unit. *Director:* Margaret Thompson. *Camera:* A. E. Jeakins. M.O.I. 10 mins. non-T.

Subject: Two methods of making silage.

Treatment: This film is a straightforward exposition of how to make silage. Like nearly all the films in this series it has the important quality of not only showing you *how* to carry out a process, it also makes you want to go and *do* it immediately. Even if you haven't got any cattle to feed in the winter and are not interested in the shortage of imported cattle cake, silage making, on the screen, looks like an extremely interesting job. This, in spite of the commentator's sinister reference to "many failures". Technically, it is interesting to note the artfully simple way in which the two methods of making silage, one in a silo and the other in a clamp, are interwoven without losing clarity.

Propaganda Value: The sheer efficiency of the agricultural series makes them outstanding films—their propaganda value rather depends on how many farmers see them and how many of those farmers are in need of their lessons.

Surgery in Chest Disease. *Production:* G. B. Instructional for the British Council. *Director:* A. Reginald Dobson. *Camera:* Frank North. *Diagrams:* H. L. Stringer. *Scenario:* M. Cathcart Borer. *Time:* 40 mins.

Reviewed by a doctor

THIS film "is primarily intended for exhibition to overseas medical audiences. . . . It is hoped that the film will serve to give to such audiences an indication of the scope and level of Chest Surgery and collateral services in Britain".

The choice of the most difficult and hazardous operation in chest surgery, of the surgeon, of the anaesthetist and of the hospital, has produced something worth bragging about. Whether the bragging has been done in the most effective way is less certain.

The opening—a mass radiography of industrial workers, including the patient—is effective. His subsequent progress is followed in detail. Much of this—his arrival in the Out-patient department, his interview with the almoner, and more—is irrelevant, and could well be cut out entirely or, at most, briefly indicated by much shorter sequences. While our patient enjoys a cup of tea in bed, we tour the ward, inspecting other cases of various types of chest disease and are shown, briefly, their diagnosis and treatment. This section is very good, and more could have been made of it. A

more detailed description, in the commentary, of the technique of bronchography would have added to the value of that sequence.

In the course of investigation the patient is bronchoscoped, realistically enough. We see two remarkable diagrams of views down the bronchoscope but are brought to earth with a bump by a crude cartoon of the larynx accompanied, fatally, by the remark "The vocal cords are normal"! It would be so much better left out, or at least passed without comment. The doctors consult at length, as is entirely right and proper, but it would have been interesting to know their findings and how they were led to decide upon operation. Without this, the sequence is too long.

Preparation of the patient for operation is well done. The anaesthetic technique, without whose development such operations would not be possible, is dealt with mainly by some excellent diagrams. I feel that valuable detail has been sacrificed to the desire for continuity (the patient we see is not the one who actually undergoes the operation). The *pièce de résistance*, the operation itself, is magnificent. The shots inside the chest, for instance, give a view that is seen, normally, only by the surgeon and, perhaps, by his first assistant. The surgical technique is faultless. The result is far and away the best description of an operation that I have ever come across, in cinematograph or any other medium, and this, alone, makes the film well worth while.

From these dizzy heights we fall once more to levels suitable rather for entertainment than for instruction and pass through some pretty scenes of rehabilitation centres, blossoming orchards and the like to our happy ending. The only gaffe—the patient walks off to the consulting room arm-in-arm with the sister—drew laughter and applause from the audience. Alan Howland wrestles nobly and, on the whole, successfully

SIGHT and SOUND

A cultural Quarterly

MONTHLY FILM BULLETIN

appraising educational
and
entertainment values

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with the outlandish medical jargon of the commentary.

This is the most ambitious, and the most successful, medical documentary film yet produced, and all concerned are to be congratulated on a very real achievement. My criticism is based on the opinion, with which many will disagree, that a frankly instructional film would provide more substantial and more impressive fare for a medical audience and, being less obvious, would be the more effective propaganda.

Bill Jack v. Adolf Hitler. March of Time. 17 mins.

March of Time re-enters the arena of controversy with several loud explosions in this latest issue. As a revelation of the fundamental simplicity of the American mind it would be hard to beat.

Bill Jack, a former Trade Union "business agent", now runs a factory of his own which has apparently astounded the whole U.S.A. with its production output. There are, in the film, very few signs of production at all—indeed the workers (who include some of the most glamorous girls it has ever been our good fortune to see) are far too busy (a) hooting late arrivals, (b) knocking off for doughnuts and coffee, (c) having their corns examined in the factory foot clinic, (d) listening to pep talks from the boss, (e) dancing at their machines to recorded jive, (f) reclining in steam baths, and (g) holidaying in Florida.

Despite all this we are informed that the 7,500 employees (called "associates") work twelve hours a day, seven days a week and just love it. After the war all the girls will be sacked and the mobilised men given back their jobs, and they love that too. This is to be understood, because "the management are brilliant mass psychologists who have succeeded in convincing the workers by unmistakable, concrete signs that they have their welfare at heart".

Our favourite scene was the Union shop steward accompanying the boss on a visit to tell some misguided worker that he was a dirty so-and-so for not pulling up his socks and co-operating with this paragon of employers.

It should be added that this is the best photographed American subject *March of Time* has produced for many months.

Workers' Weekend. Production: Crown Film Unit. Narrative by Officer of Royal Canadian Air Force. M.O.I. 13 mins.

Subject: The assembly of a Wellington bomber by aircraft workers in 23½ hours of their weekend spare time.

Treatment: Straightforward location shooting during the occurrence of the incident. The work was covered by several cameras. The commentary is done in radio eye-witness style, which helps the film to retain a vigorous quality of newsreel immediacy.

Propaganda Value: Indirectly good. Not so much because of the effect on morale of knowing that aircraft workers are prepared to give their own time to such a purpose, as because they are seen working with good comradeship and with pleasure in their craft. The film reminds us that, whether we like the fact or not, a great many documentary films stand or fall by the quality of their commentary. In *Workers' Weekend* the visuals are excellently shot and edited, but they are altogether conventional in style and pretty familiar in content. Neither does the commentator say or do anything revolutionary, but the

Canadian voice, speaking in an easy-going, colloquial, racy style, manages to give the narrative a warmth and intimacy which lifts the film out of the ruck. A passing reference to a worker glimpsed only for a fleeting close-up is sufficient to put us on good terms with this ex-hairdresser or merchant seaman.

Here is a film, successful because of its simplicity, which demonstrates the importance of film-makers cultivating their ears as well as their eyes.

Before the Raid. Production: Crown Film Unit. Producer: Ian Dalrymple. Direction: Jiri Weiss. Camera: E. Catford. M.O.I. 35 mins.

Subject: The looting of a Norwegian fishing village by the Germans; resistance by the Norwegians; German reprisals and the escape of some Norwegians to Britain. The story being told as a flash-back by Norwegians who are returning to Norway on a Commando raid.

Treatment: A well directed and occasionally exciting film. Good use of natural British resources for Norwegian background.

Before the Raid is a much better job than any of the studio Occupied-Europe films. It tells a simple story honestly, but only in one plane. The chase sequence in Norway and the small boat sequence in the North Sea, are fresh and exciting.

Propaganda Value: A simple film that should come as a relief to cinema audiences after the appalling Occupied-Europe muck they have had to sit through in the past.

The Battle of Britain. Production: U.S. War Dept. Special Division S.O.S. with co-operation of the Signal Corps. M.O.I. 1hr.

Subject: The Battle of Britain; the fighting

qualities of the Royal Air Force; resistance of civilians to bombing.

Treatment: *The Battle of Britain* was made by Frank Capra especially for American soldiers coming to Britain. It deals fairly honestly but at great length with the history of Britain between May 1940 and May 1941. Nearly all the material comes from Ministry of Information films, and like most assembly jobs it is well cut. The actual blitz sequences tend to be too long for British audiences, but on the whole it is a clear, neat job.

Propaganda Value: It should help to improve Anglo-American relations, in this country. People always like to know that someone thinks well of them.

Documentary News Letter

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Film Societies

The Manchester and Salford Film Society began its autumn session with *Lenin in 1918*. At the performance on November 21st Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevski* will be the principal film and there will also be some distinguished short films. The Hon. Secretary is R. Cordwell, 31 Cringle Road, Manchester, 19.

The Film Society of Ayrshire will hold eight ordinary and two repertory meetings both at Ayr and Kilmarnock during the present season. Among the films shown will be some early Disneys, some French, Russian, Dutch and American films and documentaries from Britain, Canada, America and Russia. The Hon. Secretary is Arthur J. Nelson, 6 Hilary Crescent, Ayr.

The Belfast Film Institute Society showed at its November meeting *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Later in the season will be shown Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, *The Blue Angel* and *L'Etrange M. Victor*. The membership Secretary is Miss Doreen McFetridge, 52 Donegall Place, Belfast.

The Aberdeen Film Society began its present season in October with a membership which has increased from 150 to 501. Afternoon and evening performances are being continued. At the November meeting *Derrière la Facade* was shown. *The Magnificent Ambersons* may be shown later on. The Secretary is Alice C. Hendry, 7 Queen's Terrace, Aberdeen.

The Devon and Exeter Film Society continues on a reduced scale, with sub-standard films. Meetings are held at the Visual Education Centre,

University College, Exeter. A season of eight shows includes the following features: *The White Hell of Pitz Palu*, *The Cheat*, *Nanook of the North*, *Kameraschafft*, *General Line*, *Jew Süss*, *South Riding*, *Film and Reality*, with supporting documentaries. Time is allowed for discussion. The Society co-operates intimately with the Film Council of the South-West.

The London Scientific Film Society's sixth season opened on 6th November. The programme included three Russian films, one on mechanical coal-mining in the Donetz Basin, and two dealing with the work of the Pavlov Institute for medical research in Moscow. There was also shown the first of the series of "research films" which the Society is screening this year. It was described in a talk by the producer, and illustrated the use of the cine camera in research—in this case to produce a slow motion colour study of stresses set up in a transparent plastic model section of a railway line. The programme concluded with *Neuro-Psychiatry*, the recent film on the treatment of war-time neuroses made for American medical audiences.

The Society's efforts in obtaining films such as the latter, not normally available to the public, is greatly to be commended. It has previously shown specimens of naval technical films and it is to be hoped that examples of the other two Services' work will be forthcoming.

Response to the Society's announcements this year reflects an immense interest in the scientific film. In fact, applications for membership have been so heavy that the Society has had regretfully to close the membership list for this season owing to limitations of theatre accommodation. Plans are however being made for operations on

a larger scale next year and full details of these will be published later.

The Dundee and St. Andrews Film Society has decided to show during the coming season some of the best American pictures; among them *The Magnificent Ambersons*, *All That Money Can Buy*, and *Winter set*. There will be some Continental films and also Russian films. A children's film show will be given on Sunday, December 26th. The Hon. Treasurer of this Society is G. A. Kinnear, 3 King's Road, Dundee.

The Film Council of the South-West continues to cater for the film needs of the South-West Region, in the non-theatrical field. Its area Film Library distributes films all over the region. At its headquarters (University College, Exeter), it provides information, advice, lectures and film shows for a great variety of bodies and individuals, educational, social, medical, national defence. The *Film Council*, together with the lectureship in Visual Education, and an Information Bureau, Reference Library and Education Laboratory constitute a Visual Education Centre. Teachers are trained, educational thought and discussion on modern media are promoted and research is carried on. A survey of existing visual materials of all types is being carried out. Readers of *D.N.L.* are invited to submit material (stills, film strips, illustrations, charts, catalogues, etc.) for this survey. A Saturday morning Film Forum for showing and discussing documentary and educational films has been organised. The *Film Council* will publish a Visual Bulletin describing the work in greater detail. Enquiries should be addressed to G. Patrick Meredith, Visual Education Centre, University College, Exeter.

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SHOOTING "Workers' Week-end"

by Ralph Elton

Crown Film Unit

THE Ministry of Information is often criticised in being behind the times with its film releases and unfortunately these criticisms bounce back on the film makers. As film makers we are only too conscious of the hold-ups in film-making caused by delay in script approval, facility granting, delays between the film's final completion and its release and all the rest of it: but, we are still to be criticised in our speed of production and there are people who do not fail to make the accusation.

Lately, the Crown Film Unit has had the opportunity of researching into the possibility of answering this accusation. There is not a complete answer but it has at least been proved that a proportion of "hot on the minute" films could be at the disposal of the Ministry of Information should they care to ask for them. The production of *Workers' Week-end* served as a useful pointer towards a method of procuring them in spite of the fact that this particular subject was about aeroplanes and some three years cold.

We found the subject for ourselves while we were researching into another film. The manager of an aircraft factory suggested that he would have a bomber built in thirty hours as an answer to Kaiser and his Liberty ships, provided that we would cover the operation with a camera. We undertook the challenge in spite of the fact that we were a little pessimistic. We felt that we should offer our encouragement to the factory but we foresaw little more than a glorified newsreel item as a result of our work. The result was a very agreeable surprise, and what was more surprising still was that it should have come from a Unit that had been criticised more than most for its slowness.

At first sight it appeared that a director would be superfluous on this film. We were informed that no interference with the work on the record bomber could be tolerated. Personal direction of the cast was out and so were rehearsals. We were given a schedule for the building of the bomber and the approximate times and places at which the various operations would take place. Every facility in the way of mechanics of film making was offered but the shop stewards and the management were adamant on the point of not being "mucked up" during the actual job. "Hot" subjects will probably be closely tied to the national effort, and interference will not be welcome. This may well be the usual sort of thing that the "hot" film maker will have to face.

At this point there will be advocates for using camera only on this type of film, but this would inevitably lead to the making of an "item" as opposed to a film. The director has his function to fulfil although that function is very different from the normal. The usual arguments apply re continuity of thought, relation of one shot with the next and visualisation of the final film, but instead of the director adapting the schedule to his ideas he must adapt his ideas to the schedule.

He should, of course, know his subject visually to perfection and it may be possible—as it was with us—that he may be unable to study his subject action before shooting. A bomber being built in a hurry looks very different from one being built at the normal speed. If he cannot study his subject at first hand he must rely very largely

upon the descriptive powers of those employed on the location. Nevertheless the director must form a film conception and then bring his specialised knowledge to bear on the management's schedule. He must draw up a shooting schedule to dovetail perfectly with the management's. As far as film people are concerned it is a case of the tail wagging the dog. The subject and its schedule dictate to the film conception and the director's function becomes a case of juggling with the various schedules and making the very best of them to ensure that no filmic possibilities are unnecessarily wasted. It is all a matter of foresight and anticipation and when he has exercised these talents to the full the director can do no more than hope that it "all be all right on the night".

One Set-up Ahead

It will probably not be all right on the night and the director will learn a lot about this new film technique to his cost. Our teething troubles were many. In the first hour's work there were some six takes on the main location, but the number of set-ups—including lamp shifting—was prodigious. Our trouble was that by the time we had set up for a shot, the process which we had intended to film would be over and finished and we would be left high and dry with nothing in front of the camera. If the director follows the normal practice and tries to stay with his camera while shooting he will attain nothing but valuable minutes lost in watching the camera moved and in peering through the finder. He should always be one set-up ahead and he should make sure that he is informed by some reliable person on the location of the filmic possibilities in the work to be done within the following half-hour. In the beginning we lost a number of action shots because we were not expecting them at the moment and because we could not set up in time to catch them. Again, the director's function is very largely a matter of anticipation. At the same time the camera man should be preparing ahead and leaving his operator in charge of the camera. In fact, there should be a representative of each department preparing the way ahead and the call on a unit is heavy. Although we represented two production units on *Workers' Week-end* we were doing the work of four. The electrical staff got the worst of it. They had to be in two places at once; with the two directors and chief camera-men ahead and with the two cameras behind. They were lighting some big stuff too. There were five main locations in the factory entailing five complete changes in power mains. We all know how long it normally takes to light a long shot in a factory. One very long shot was lit in something like ten minutes on this occasion. Fifteen electricians were none too many and their vast collection of lamps was not over-sufficient either.

There was one other departure from the normal routine of film making worth mention. We had a commentary writer on the location with us. In spite of the director's "script-cum-schedule" it was left to him to collect colourful word detail from the location. As we moved from one shot to the next he questioned the people we filmed and took notes of their names, their attitude, and any relevant details which in the end might give life and humanity to the finished film. This method of working in spontaneous and close co-operation

with the commentary writer proved extremely successful.

On the whole the management's schedule and the script-cum-shooting schedule worked out well in spite of the bomber being some six hours ahead of time and calling for some pretty hasty adaptations to the shooting schedule. We exposed more than ten thousand feet of film consisting of more than two hundred and fifty individual set-ups which gave us a show copy length of one thousand two hundred and fifty feet. The mechanics worked well from using an electric trolley as a kind of powered light carrying tripod to holding the camera in the hand. The script—what there was of it—came off. In the finished film the detail and the impressionistic stuff individually fell into line. The cut-aways and tricks worked. The climax, unbelievable as it seemed to us, was over shot. After three day's preparations and one day's shooting it looked as if "hot" films had been proved a possibility. The commentary was written up in the train on the way back to London and recorded within twenty-four hours of the last piece of film being exposed. There was a rough-cut within the fourth day and a show copy on the tenth in spite of there being a day's delay in sending the rushes into the laboratories and another before starting to cut.

Film Societies (Cont.)

Edinburgh Film Guild has opened its fourteenth season with a record membership of over 1,500. During the summer an Exhibition of Film Décor was held and the Guild also took the initiative during the autumn in arranging for the formation of an Edinburgh Scientific Film Society. A performance of scientific films was given.

The season opened on October 17 with *Le Bonheur* (Marcel L'Herbier), *High Over the Borders* (Canada), *Common Cause* (M. of I.), and *Western Daze* (George Pal). On October 30 *My Universities* (Gorki) was shown with *Danger Area* (M. of I.) and *Spanish Fiesta* (Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo). On November 14 Sir John Orr and Paul Rotha were present and spoke during the performance of *World of Plenty*. The programme also included *Thunder over Mexico*, which can now be seen free from controversial complication, and Massingham's *In Which We Live* (M. of I.).

Plans include the showing of a group of Polish films by Eugene Cekalski in December and feature films booked are *Burgtheater* (November 28), *Derrière la Facade* (December 12), *La Fin du Jour* (January 9), and *The Magnificent Ambersons* (January 23).

The Guild has taken new office premises at 21 Castle Street, Edinburgh, 2, and while Forsyth Hardy is in London, Agnes Smith is acting as Interim Hon. Secretary.

The Merseyside Film Institute Society held its annual general meeting on August 4th and re-elected W. Lyon Blease as chairman, T. F. Wilson as Honorary Secretary, and A. E. Harrison as Honorary Treasurer.

The new season opened on October 8th with the performance of *L'Esclave Blanche*. A poll was taken at the show to assist the committee in choosing next year's programme. Out of seven films *La Fin du Jour* came out on top, with *Citizen Kane* in second place. The remaining shows this year were *My Universities* in November and *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* in December.

Sound on Documentaries Could be Improved

by Ken Cameron

Crown Film Unit

As a documentary sound engineer I have more than once been disconcerted by people who bluntly ask: "Why is the sound on your films so bad?" or who perhaps say: "I never seem to be able to hear what the characters in some of your films are saying." It is humiliating and exasperating when one hears such remarks; particularly so when one realises that more often than not they are absolutely true. The offer of a little space in DOCUMENTARY NEWS LETTER seemed to me to be an admirable opportunity for saying some things to the documentary film world as from a pulpit; for turning the lame defence that inevitably is the technician's reply to lay criticism into a direct attack upon some of the methods of the documentary producers. Many of the films for the sound of which I have been responsible have unsatisfactory sound tracks. I know that more than anybody. But I resent deeply the comparisons which are so often made between our semi-intelligible dialogue and the smooth crisp sparkle of, say, the average American film. I envy intensely, and shall always try to imitate, the polish that is almost always there.

Some time ago DOCUMENTARY NEWS LETTER printed an article specifically damning the appalling level of intelligibility that characterises the average M.O.I. non-theatrical show. Perhaps it was this article that inspired discussions that began to take place. The object of these discussions was, of course, to locate and remove the causes of the trouble. Many of them are technical. They are problems that should all be soluble. Any sound engineer, when he knows that a film is to be played on inferior 16 mm. equipment in acoustically impossible halls, can, and generally will, make obvious little modifications to his re-recording technique. He will perhaps harden up the speech, open up the range between dialogue and the background, and so on. He should, I think, prepare thereby a second sound negative which will be used for all prints, both standard and sub-standard, intended for non-theatrical projection. Equally, provided he has the time and the necessary information, he will bear that slight but firm pressure upon the laboratory doing the work to ensure that dupe negative and prints are competently made. If he was very fortunate he might even have the opportunity of viewing a print or two at random to see that his instructions are being carried out. But in view of the pressure of work under which most of this country's sound departments are labouring at the moment, I feel that the main part of the work of laboratory supervision and print checking should be borne by the controlling distributor—generally the M.O.I. This work appears to have been done by them in the past with a singular lack of effectiveness. As a rule, however, the engineer who after all is ultimately held responsible for the quality of the sound, is not told that the film will be reduced to 16 mm.; he will not know what laboratory will handle this and other release work; he will certainly not be given the chance of ensuring that all his careful work is not ruined

by official negligence and technical incompetence. There will often be some commercial or political reason why the release printing of some short film must be done by a laboratory which has shown itself in the past to be unwilling or incapable of making a satisfactory job of the particular system of recording involved. At least that sort of thing has frequently been my experience. This, however, is only one side of the story. The other, and to my mind more important reason why some British documentary films merit adverse criticism of their sound tracks is purely the fault of those in charge of the production. The first and obvious example is their choice of actors for speaking parts. I am convinced that, at all costs, dialect, in the accepted sense of the word, should be avoided. The reasons are plain. Broad Suffolk is perhaps tolerated in East Anglia; it is laughed at in Scotland; in the Mid West U.S.A. it is not worth running. Recordists who after all are not born saboteurs, agree with their directors that the best person to play the part of a Cornish fisherman is a man who is at least connected intimately with both Cornwall and fish. Such realism is the life-blood of documentary. But in so many cases a more careful choice of artiste could result in a sound track that would satisfy all needs. So often tests are made, and principles chosen without

real regard to their diction, their accent, or their control of the spoken word. Provided the bloke has a roof to his mouth he'll do. And vague promises of subsequent post synchronisation are rarely kept. Fortunately I believe that these habits are waning. I believe that the documentary man is beginning to learn the lessons that were learnt by the commercial studios years ago.

Again, in many cases the location where many sequences are shot gives the recordist no opportunity to do good work. A reasonably quiet background is essential if the final track is to be controlled and smooth. The present day documentary is rapidly ceasing to be a simple commentary-music-effects affair. The sync. camera is much more to the fore than hitherto. And rightly so. But the methods of our directors must grow up with their ideas. The recordist must be regarded as an essential and valuable member of the production unit, and no longer as some sort of necessary evil. He should be consulted on artistes, on locations, on sets and on dialogue. Is this too much to ask? He will give valuable help and co-operation in the preliminary stages of a film. But he will expect similar co-operation from his director whilst on the floor. When the film is finished, the M.O.I., if it is to be released under their banner, should notify the studio concerned when they order dupes and prints, and from which laboratory they order them. The sound engineer would thus have an opportunity of following his work through its final stages. The vast amount of footage now being processed for the M.O.I. theatrical and non-theatrical shows makes it increasingly hard to ensure first-class prints, but at least let us make some effort in the right direction.

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GERRARD 1736/7

FILM OF THE MONTH

Victory through Air Power: Released by United Artists, made by Disney Unit. With Major Alexander D. Seversky. 65 mins.

Victory Through Air Power is the perfect civilian armchair critic's guide to the war, particularly for those in the Eastern hemisphere.

Anyone who saw the real films of the last war such as *West Front 1918* or *All Quiet on the Western Front* is bound to remember the sequence in *All Quiet on the Western Front* where Lew Ayres on leave home again in Germany after four years in the trenches is so disgusted with what he finds at home that he hurries back to his comrades in the firing line before his leave is finished. Particularly good was the scene in the pub where he wanders aimlessly from table to table where the elderly civilians he once knew well have the war maps spread out before them and each one a perfect amateur strategist, each demonstrating with eager shouts the key to victory—Push on to Paris.

It would be interesting to know exactly how Disney came to be tied up with such a film: whether he undertook this work out of a profound political conviction or whether he is now open to every form of sponsorship. As far as technique is concerned, the film must have given his technicians a good many headaches. The first quarter is a quite successful attempt to give a flippant but good humoured picture in human terms of the progress of aviation from the Wright Brothers to the outbreak of the present war, but from then on it is our old mate, Major Seversky, giving a lecture on the strategy of the present war. There is quite a lot of the stuff we all know so well. Seversky sitting at desk. Seversky pointing at maps. Seversky wagging his finger at the audience. Seversky striding across the room to twiddle his technicoloured globe. But most of it of necessity is diagram—sometimes animated diagram but often enough just plain diagram to illustrate the sales talk. And often it is no livelier and often a good deal duller than any diagram film that we have seen for the past fifteen years, though the bright colour, of course, lends an added touch to the rhetoric.

But taking the film as a whole, Disney has seen fit to plunge from his safe little nest of Christopher Robin and the Farmyard into the

boiling waters of political policy and world strategy and it is by those standards that the film must be judged, and by those standards the film is childish in the extreme, not likely to help anybody understand what this war means and only too well calculated to encourage the "push on to Paris" school. Seversky's and the film's main thesis is that the Allies, because of their long, difficult and dangerous supply lines, are foolish to try to compete weight for weight and weapon for weapon with the enemies' short interior lines and their reliance should be placed almost exclusively on giant long-range bomber and fighter airplanes to devastate the enemy's industrial centres. This thesis as expounded, sounds completely unconvincing, and as illustrated on the screen, becomes positively childish.

To take only a few examples: the statement is made that the island of Crete rather than Gibraltar or Malta now dominates naval strategy in the Mediterranean through its land-based aircraft. You wonder why such an absurd statement should be made until you come shortly afterwards in the film to the fact that Crete was captured by the use of air power alone. Similarly it is without evidence or foundation claimed that Norway was taken and the Maginot Line broken solely by the use of air power and that it was only the local ascendancy of the R.A.F. (rather than the ill-conceived German concentration on the German drive to Paris) which permitted Dunkirk. By this time the trend of the fake argument is clear and we can hardly be surprised when the Battle of Britain is presented as a victory for eight-gun Spitfires over one-gun Junkers 87's (which I believe scarcely appeared over Britain after the first few days) whilst the civilian victory over the night bombing of London, Coventry, etc.—the first real try-out and failure of Seversky's strategy—is totally and significantly ignored. By now the effect of the diagrams has become just comic and we are privileged to witness through the diagram some of Seversky's pet bogeymen—U-boats which need not venture near the surface, whose torpedoes cannot miss their target, rocket-boosted bombs which pierce the concrete U-boat pens like paper (we are not told how they make the bomb hit the pen in the first instance), giant 10-ton bombs which burrow deep underground and cause major earthquakes for miles around!

I don't know how he came to overlook the idea of dropping giant bombs into Vesuvius to blow up Italy and in any case I much prefer my own ideas of electrifying the sea as a weapon against U-boats and of driving a giant tunnel, completely undermining and blowing up Germany as an effective finish to the land war. After seeing a diagram of the German war machine represented as a wheel with Allied attacks as arrows making vain thrusts against the hub, until our pal's bombers pour over and annihilate the hub at which the whole wheel shrivels up, you are bound to reflect that simply by altering the draughtsmen's orders, bombs could have been made just as effectively to bounce off the hub and the arrows to go piercing through the hub and spokes.

But much more than all this technical nonsense is the generally pernicious attitude to the war which the film propagates. Surely in the U.S.A. the man in the street is a little nearer to the facts of war than this. The whole business is presented like the Douglas Social Credit Plan by which, through the adoption of some one man's scientific technique, all the nasty mess can be painlessly avoided. Anyone who has been in or near a war or has taken part in any really worth-while human activity must know that the real thing—the agony, bloodshed, the hunger, the disillusionment and most important of all, the long wearing grind of the plain hard work without which nothing worth having is ever achieved—cannot so easily be by-passed. It is the real criticism of Disney and of this film that they should have lent such complacent hand to this pernicious doctrine. It is a pity to find in this film, the American film business slipping so easily into place inside the particular brand of fascism which the American technocrats are so busily building up. Somebody ought to tell Disney (never mind Seversky—nobody cares tuppence about him) that large-scale bombing did not beat British war production, that it is people in the end and not fancy machines that win wars and finally, and most important of all, that neither the U.S.S.R. nor China, nor damme, if it comes to that, even the British people, are going to be pleased with the prospect of wasting their people and their creative energy year after year until Seversky's fancy "made in America" toys are ready to take over and show them how it should be done.

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THE ASS AND THE NIGHTINGALE



An Ass happened to see a Nightingale one day, and said to it: "Listen, my dear. They say you have a great mastery over song. I have long wished to prove if your talent is so great as they say." On this the Nightingale began to show her art; whistled in countless ways, sobbed sustained notes, passed from one song to another; at one time let her voice die away, and echoed the distant murmur of the reed; at another time poured through the wood a shower of tiny notes. There was no one that did not listen to the song: the breezes died away, the birds were hushed, the cattle lay down on the grass; scarcely breathing, the Shepherd revelled in it, and only now and then as he listened did he smile on the shepherdess.

At length the singer ended. Then the Ass, bending its head towards the ground, observed:

"It's tolerable. To speak the truth, one can listen to you without feeling weary. But it's a great pity you don't know our Cock. You would sing much better if you were to take a few lessons from him."

REALIST FILM UNIT

34 SOHO SQUARE, W.1

Telephone: GERRARD 1958

Correspondence

DEAR SIR,

May I ask your reviewer of *The Silent Village* some open questions:

(1) Since when has the line of "This might have been you" had no propaganda value? I know few better ways of bringing tragic or political facts home to people.
(2) In order to work out this line, did Humphrey Jennings take the trouble to live and work with and understand a mining community, or did he not?

(3) As a result, did he or did he not in his film give a fair impression of a mining community, and so put across the idea of "This might have been you" to a large section of the British people?

I suggest that whatever intellectual arguments there may be against *The Silent Village* there is here much positive achievement and much that only Jennings could have done. I know one or two of the people whom the Crown Film Unit worked with in South Wales and I suspect I know mining communities in general better than your reviewer. I talked to one of the principals after the shooting was finished, and I know that it was a fair fight while it lasted, and that in the end the miners Jennings worked with respected him and his unit, and that the unit respected the miners. The picture that came out of it all had far more than "occasional moments of feeling". It was an honest co-operative attempt to imagine a situation which is almost unimaginable. Did they aim too high? Did they in many ways fail to arrive? I saw the film in Sheffield (a city surrounded by coal-mines incidentally) and I felt that it was a success; it was accepted, it was not dismissed as phoney. There are many things in the film that I for one would prefer to have done differently, but let us give credit for an honest and sincere attempt to do something more difficult than most of us ever dare to undertake.

Yours faithfully,

DONALD ALEXANDER

1943-4
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